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ABSTRACT

This digest examines the rural teacher shortage from a policy perspective and suggests strategies to address the problem. The rural teacher recruitment and retention problem varies across states. An adequate number of teachers are trained each year nationwide, but the problem is with distribution. Recent research on rural teacher recruitment and retention is thin and suggests that teachers leave rural areas because of geographic isolation, weather, distance from large communities and family, and inadequate shopping. Teachers stay because of interpersonal connections and satisfaction with the rural lifestyle. Rural administrators must target candidates with rural backgrounds or with personal characteristics or educational experiences that predispose them to live in rural areas. Most rural teachers were raised close to where they now teach. Various "grow-your-own" strategies offer incentives to local residents to become teachers. Colleges must take a greater role in recruiting students with the potential to become successful rural teachers. A rural teacher's involvement in community educational and cultural programs influences the decision to stay or leave; therefore, retention requires a coordinated school-community effort. State programs for recruiting and retaining teachers vary widely and include equalized teacher salaries, teacher supply-and-demand analyses by subject area and community, teacher placement clearinghouses, scholarships and loans, advertising in other targeted states, forgiving student loans for teacher service, and related career activities for secondary students. (Contains 15 references.) (SV)

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Attracting and Retaining Teachers in Rural Areas

Timothy Collins

ERIC DIGEST

The American Association of School Administrators (1999) has observed that the main problem of rural school districts is attracting and keeping quality teachers. The rural teacher shortage affects all subject areas but particularly math, science, and special education. This Digest examines the problem from a legislative and policy perspective. It suggests strategies to address the problem, noting sample programs from several states.

Legislative and Policy Background

The rural teacher recruitment and retention problem varies across the United States. Some states have teacher surpluses; others have shortages. According to the National Association of State Boards of Education, an adequate number of teachers is trained each year (Bradley, 1998). The problem is with distribution. State legislatures deal with teacher recruitment and retention in various ways, depending on their circumstances (see "What Some States are Doing" below) (Education Commission of the States, 1999).

In an attempt to alleviate the problem, President Clinton signed the *Higher Education Amendments* law in October 1998. Title II of this bill creates teacher recruitment grants to improve teacher quality and reduce shortages of qualified teachers in high-need districts (U.S. Department of Education, 1999).

Why Teachers Stay or Go

The principal reason teachers leave rural areas is isolation—social, cultural, and professional. Recent research on rural teacher recruitment and retention appears thin, and much of it has been conducted outside the United States. For example, a survey of teacher mobility (94 past and current teachers in a rural British Columbia school district) found that teachers leave communities because of geographic isolation, weather, distance from larger communities and family, and inadequate shopping (Murphy & Angelski, 1996/1997).

The literature suggests rural administrators have difficulty finding qualified teachers who fit in with the school and community and who will stay in the job. The "ideal" rural teacher is certified to teach more than one subject or grade level, can teach students with a wide range of abilities in the same classroom, is prepared to supervise extracurricular activities, and can adjust to the community (Lemke, 1994; Stone, 1990). In the British Columbia study, teachers stayed because of their principal, spouse employment in the community, and satisfaction with the rural lifestyle (Murphy & Angelski, 1996/1997).

Recruiting Rural Teachers

To recruit rural teachers, administrators must target candidates with rural backgrounds or with personal characteristics or educational experiences that predispose them to live in rural areas. The emphasis on background and experience is crucial for racially or culturally distinct communities. Selling points in recruitment efforts are the benefits of teaching in rural schools, such as few discipline problems, less red tape, more personal contact, greater chance for leadership, small class size, individualized instruction, greater student and parent participation, and greater teacher impact on decision making (Boylan & Bandy, 1994; Lemke, 1994; Stone, 1990).

Most rural teachers were raised close to where they now teach. Various "grow-your-own" strategies offer incentives to local residents with potential to become teachers, such as assisting them in obtaining the needed education and training. For example, Future Teachers of America (FTA) clubs encourage students to consider returning to their home communities once they have received their teaching credentials (Lemke, 1994).

Retaining Rural Teachers

Colleges must take more of a role in recruiting students who demonstrate the characteristics of successful rural teachers. The U.S. Department of Education (1998) suggests colleges should recruit aggressively in middle and high schools, exposing students to peer tutoring, camp counseling, role modeling, and classes in education theory. Although few universities in the United States have preservice programs for rural teachers, successful programs in Australia and Canada offer a rural focus in course work and provide ample opportunity for rural experiences (Stone, 1990; Boylan & Bandy, 1994).

The degree to which a rural teacher becomes involved in community educational and cultural programs influences his or her decision to remain; therefore, retention requires a coordinated school-community effort. A school-community orientation can help new rural teachers overcome feelings of isolation, acquire a sense of community security, and develop professional competence. Principals should select a new teacher's initial assignments carefully, set clear goals, welcome feedback, establish an encouraging and nonthreatening environment, and provide opportunities to interact with experienced colleagues and parents. Collegial mentoring—that is not a part of teacher evaluation—can be crucial. The school also can ease the way for new teachers by streamlining paperwork, providing a well-planned in-service program, and arranging release time for visiting other teachers' classrooms. The community should recognize new teachers' accomplishments and invite them to participate in various activities. Universities also can play an important role by offering cost-effective distance-learning courses to keep rural teachers up-to-date. (Boylan & Bandy, 1994; Lemke, 1994; Stone, 1990).

What Some States Are Doing

State programs for recruiting and retaining teachers vary considerably. Salary differentials often pit one state against another. In addition, there are rural-urban pay

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disparities within states (Iowa Governor, 1997). Two states, Kentucky and Connecticut, have equalized teacher salaries statewide to diminish regional inequalities (Bradley, 1998).

Many states have developed teacher supply-and-demand analyses to track teacher availability in subject areas and across communities. For example, Alaska's annual teacher supply-and-demand report (LaBerge, 1999) notes the teacher shortage is worsened by the state's early-retirement incentive program; low salary levels that put the state in a poor competitive position; procedural difficulties with certification; and increased time needed to earn certification. The University of Alaska Fairbanks (1997) has set up Alaska Teacher Placement, a nonprofit, statewide clearinghouse for placing teachers. The clearinghouse recruits teachers and maintains a job bank accessible on the World Wide Web.[1]

According to Oklahoma's supply-and-demand study, (1) rural districts need more early childhood and elementary teachers; (2) generally, rural districts (two-thirds of Oklahoma's school districts and one-fifth of the educators) have the greatest need for teachers; and (3) more research is needed to understand why so many more students in the state train to be teachers than are hired by Oklahoma schools (Southern Regional Education Board & Data Decision and Analysis, 1998).

Mississippi offers teachers scholarships, high-school-to-college programs, college courses, incentive loans for teachers who serve in rural areas experiencing teacher shortages, scholarships for certified teachers seeking advanced training while working in a shortage area, and home loans or rental housing for teachers in shortage areas. Mississippi also has a professional on the department of education staff who recruits teachers instate and out-of-state (Education Commission of the States, 1999).

Florida's legislature instructed its department of education to set up a teacher recruitment and retention services office to advertise positions in targeted states, provide information related to alternative certification, and sponsor the Florida Future Educator Program. For critical shortage areas the legislature created a program that forgives loans in exchange for teaching service. Pennsylvania's legislature has set up a similar program (Education Commission of the States, 1999).

The South Carolina Center for Teacher Recruitment (1998), founded in 1986, supports numerous programs and activities, including (1) the ProTeam Program, a course and club that introduces primarily minority seventh- and eighth-grade students to the idea of a teaching career; (2) the Teacher Cadet Program, an introduction-to-teaching class that twelfth graders can take for college credit; (3) the Teaching Assistant Program, a complement to the Teacher Cadet Program, that allows students to work one-on-one with teachers in critical shortage areas; (4) the Teacher Job Bank; (5) the EXPO for Teacher Recruitment; and (6) two scholarship programs for prospective teachers. Various organizations participate in South Carolina's recruitment efforts. For example, Benedict College's Minority Access to Teacher Education (MATE) program encourages college-bound minority students from rural and underdeveloped school districts to teach in rural communities or in subject areas that face teacher shortages. It also provides financial assistance, counseling, and tutoring.

Summary

Few states have developed specific programs to address the problems of rural teacher recruitment and retention. If the national teacher supply-and-demand problem is the result of distribution, not the number of teachers, states and rural school districts have an opportunity to put their best foot forward and attract quality teachers. The Education Commission of the States (1999) outlines a number of strategies for states: offer programs for high school and college students; recruit midcareer professionals from other fields; forgive scholarship and loan debts in exchange for teaching service; make a special effort to place teachers in low-performing schools suffering economic hardships; and create programs, positions, and agencies to promote recruitment.

Regardless of state policies, rural schools and their communities have many tools at their disposal for recruiting and retaining teachers. They can create local programs, possibly in cooperation with a nearby college or university, to attract local youth into teaching. Districts can develop orientation programs and mentoring, and support joint school-community efforts to help new teachers feel more at home. Most importantly, schools and communities should publicize the advantages of teaching in a rural community.

[1]At this writing the Web address is <http://zorba.uafadm.alaska.edu/atp/>

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